

## **FARM GROUP PERSPECTIVE ON U.S. FARM POLICY**

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Keeping rural America vibrant and vital is essential to Farm Bureau. Our members, four million families strong, live and earn their livelihood primarily in rural areas.

The preceding speakers presented some of the numerical, statistical demographics of rural America. America's farmers and ranchers *are* those demographics. We are the people and the economy, at least a significant portion.

The nation's attention this year has been drawn to rural America as a result of natural disasters. Nightly television news showed farm houses ripped from their foundations by raging floodwaters and dust billowing around a farmer's feet as he walked the rows of his dehydrated crop. These and similar scenes evoked sympathy. Rural people are grateful for the aid and assistance they have received so far. But the need will continue after the television spotlights fade.

Disaster programs implemented by the federal government are in place. The programs and regulations must be handled with common sense and compassion. A tremendous job of rebuilding and restructuring faces rural inhabitants. We need a helping hand, not a heavy hand, from government.

In the Midwest, more than one thousand levees were breached. Millions of acres were flooded. Now, with the water receding, some pools remain.

Farmers want to get back to their farming. Some outside of agriculture have already suggested that many of the levees should not be rebuilt. They want the flooded land left alone. Some even want the flooded land classified as wetlands since there has been water standing on it for more than two weeks. Most have not mentioned compensating the landowners involved. The federal government is said to be considering a buy-out of landowners as a lower cost alternative to rebuilding the levees. That's still talk, though.

Temporary assistance programs for flood and drought sufferers alike are already in place and helping those who need it. And we in rural America are grateful. As we look to rebuild and improve rural America, rural development will be a policy catchall for many voices. Many will be well-meaning, many will be self-serving.

I expect the term “rural development” will be heard loudly and often as we write the next farm bill. The 1995 farm bill will do much more than set prices. Interests outside and inside agriculture will load the legislation with measures that address food safety, land use planning, wealth redistribution, conservation practices, government spending and trade.

Who will be involved? Everyone who wants to further their particular point of view. Of course, there is the administration. President Clinton was elected to control spending and reduce the deficit. I still want to believe he will try. But I also see he tends to be influenced by the last interest group that talks with him and he certainly tries to arrange compromises with all concerned.

Secretary Espy, as our administration point man, has his particular belief that farm programs should address and enhance rural development. We believe he is dedicated to serving production agriculture, but he has a track record of yielding to pressures from social planners. There are many other new appointees, as well as those yet to be named to fill open positions in the department, who will play a role. Others who will control the legislation are, of course, those who will write it and vote on it—our legislators and their staffs. This is a new Congress—25 percent of the House of Representatives and 14 percent of the Senate were not there the last time a farm bill was written. We have an opportunity with our old friends and this new blood.

Environmental and consumer groups will seek to play a large role in the discussions. They are already planning for it. There is no question, no doubt in my mind, that environmental groups will seek to further erode our property rights in the next farm bill. They will use the farm bill to mandate their brand of politically correct agriculture.

It is getting to the point that farmers may soon question the value of the farm program. The University of Missouri estimates that, with declining base yields, flex acres and other modifications, farm program participation is worth as little as \$10 an acre to a corn grower and \$20 an acre to a wheat grower. That may not be enough to cause some producers to stand in line at the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS) or to jump through the regulatory hoops those outside agriculture are imposing.

Politicians and special interest lobbyists will not be the only ones seeking to influence farm legislation. Within agriculture we will see various factions operating. Those who do not participate in farm programs will look to protect their interests, and there will be the continuing big farmer versus small farmer debate, with more lower-income producers adding their voices. In-fighting among commodities

probably will not be much different than what we have gone through in the past.

Because of the direction of our opponents' interests, we will be engaged in debates over food safety, chemical use, biotechnology and food costs. We will talk about conservation, sustainability and research for alternative crops, and alternative uses of traditional crops. Farm Bureau, following the policy guidelines established by farmers, will work to maximize our ability to farm and make a profit.

I want to make one more observation about the future of rural America, one much closer to home. To look at our future, let us look at the recent past.

The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) was founded in 1919. Farm Bureau owes its founding to the land grant system's Extension Service. Early on, many state legislatures required that a county have a Farm Bureau before an extension agent could be hired. The idea was that, with an organized Farm Bureau present, the agent would have a ready audience of local farmers handy. The latest information on agriculture and improvements for rural living could then be carried from the university to the farmer by the agent.

The system worked extremely well. Eventually, farmers wanted to do more through their Farm Bureau. They wanted to form co-ops, lobby for legislation and speak out on civic issues. Farmers wanted their organization to be a moderating voice for all aspects of agriculture. So the direct tie between Farm Bureau and land grant universities was cut.

Yet, there is still a close connection, a very close bond. We are proud of our ag schools and our extension system. But farmers fear we are losing our agriculture professionals, that extension services are drifting away from the original purpose. Traditionally, academic work paid for by the public focused on teaching and research that fostered growth. Today, many in agriculture feel the direction, the scope and the goals of extension and university research are changing. We see and hear all too often of a change in direction, a change cited as necessary to build an urban constituency. This is done with the idea that funding will be more easily accomplished or justified.

We think we see the land grant system joining the urban migration. Rightly or wrongly, this is a common perception out in the country. Why do we believe this? Some examples:

- We see federal funding to the land grant system increasingly directed into non production-oriented areas.
- We see tax-supported research projects awarded on the basis of political fads.
- We hear of research results being suppressed because the results are not what were expected. Projects conducted in Iowa and

Texas were both terminated without publication because expected levels of agricultural chemical contamination in run-off and groundwater did not materialize. Research procedures were not questioned but the results were. Sound science took a back seat to the political urge for environmental correctness.

- Just as bad, much of the available research money is now being spent on projects that verify and defend conventional agricultural practices. Most of these practices were developed and disseminated by the Extension Service in the first place. Now we must defend best management practices from baseless charges made by those with far less knowledge. This takes time and money that could be put to far better uses. Since research dollars are always in limited supply, farmers would like more say in what projects are undertaken.
- In Farm Bureau we are increasingly learning that if we want answers from the scientific community, we are expected to authorize and pay for a special study. Farmers need answers if agriculture is to have a role in any public policy debate. Whether the issue is pesticide residue tolerances, rural health care and cost reform, trade barrier reduction, or the impact of restricting chemical use on minor crops—we have had to fund studies to get answers. These are issues of importance to all farmers, to all rural residents and, it could be argued, to all citizens. I think they should have been addressed routinely, rather than as an extra-curricular consulting opportunity.

Farmers fear other developments in the Extension Service as well:

- We see a push toward organic, sustainable agriculture. I think I know what sustainable means, but I also think everyone has their own definition. My definition includes the word “profitable”—because without profit there is no permanence. Some of these project reports on sustainable agriculture ignore profit, and are, therefore, ignored by farm families.
- We can always use improved marketing procedures and techniques.
- We believe there will be tremendous opportunities for farmers through new uses of existing commodities.
- We expect new plant varieties, better integrated pest control measures, innovative machinery and enhanced animal production techniques.
- We need help determining the best management practices we can use, those that accomplish the goals society establishes for agriculture while being environmentally friendly as well.

Many of you in this room can play a major role in maintaining America's agricultural superiority. That is the public policy message from America's farmers to you today—we need your help in developing practical approaches to today's farming challenges. We need your help developing common sense ways to farm better, more economically and environmentally.

Some in government and elsewhere would have us jump from our current method of farming to other methods, untried or unproven. But farming is an evolutionary science and your teachings must accommodate evolutionary change. To be of the greatest help to the farm community, programs must reflect that evolution through a measured, tested approach. Please do not join the rush to embrace the latest fad or prove the popular cause.

Farm Bureau is proud to work with you. We have in the past. We will in the future. You can help provide us with the answers we need so we can give the people of the United States and the world the agricultural production system they need.

Just last month, several heads of agriculture met with the AFBF board of directors. We visit regularly with both land grant school agriculture deans and Extension Service directors. We enjoy the alliance that has developed over the decades. And Farm Bureau is the first group to speak up in defense of higher budgets for our land grant schools.

We have a partnership built on more than seventy-five years of co-operation and mutual respect. Working together to build rural America, our accomplishments will continue to be unparalleled and unequalled anywhere in the world, anytime in history.



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